

PLANNING A HIKING TRIP IN ALASKA

Alaska has unlimited opportunities for both day hikes and extended backpacking trips in some of the most diverse and spectacular wild country anywhere. However, developed trails are few and far between, and Alaska's enormous size and lack of roads can make planning a difficult task. You may have to do considerable research initially, but you will be rewarded with an unforgettable experience.

- **WHERE TO GO**

Please study the enclosed brochures that describe Alaska's state and federal recreation lands. Once you have narrowed your choice of areas, our office or the agency managing the area can offer you further assistance. Specify how much time you plan to spend, whether you plan to drive, boat or fly to your destination, and how much wilderness camping experience you have. We can provide brochures, trail descriptions (if available), and information packets. You may want to get a good guidebook (see "Additional References").

- **TRAILS**

You can find developed trails near some of Alaska's larger cities and towns such as Fairbanks, Juneau, Anchorage, and Kenai, and most of these are accessible by road. There are extensive trails on the Kenai Peninsula and in Chugach State Park near Anchorage. You can expect more people sharing the backcountry with you on developed trails.

- **CROSS-COUNTRY TRAVEL**

Most of Alaska's public recreation lands are true wilderness. There are no trails, bridges, or signs, and you must chart your own course using topographic maps and compass. Vast areas of Alaska are un-hikeable wetlands: a mosaic of forest, marsh, muskeg, meandering rivers, lakes, and ponds. Even alpine meadows that appear to offer easy hiking may actually be masses of tussocks – unwieldy clumps of vegetation surrounded by mud and water. The best hiking is on ridges and along the gravel bars of larger rivers and streams, so you may want to focus your plans on alpine areas. Rivers and streams are swift and extremely cold and crossings may be hazardous. Be prepared to re-route your trip rather than risk a dangerous crossing. *You must be completely self-sufficient and responsible for your own safety!*

- **ACCESS and TRANSPORTATION**

The Dalton, Denali, Steese, and Taylor Highways lead to some outstanding hiking areas but are unpaved. If you rent a vehicle check the policy regarding driving on unpaved roads. There is no public bus system for Alaska's highways but there are some commercial bus and van services in summer. The Alaska Railroad provides service from Seward and Whittier on the coast to Fairbanks in the Interior. The Alaska Marine Highway (ferry system) serves Southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound, Kodiak Island, and the Alaska Peninsula. For remote areas you may need to charter a boat or plane to reach your final destination.

- **PUBLIC USE CABINS**

There are many public use cabins in Southeast Alaska, Prince William Sound, and the Kenai Peninsula, and they are accessible by boat, floatplane, or trail. Other public cabins are located on Kodiak and

Shuyak Islands, Nancy Lakes State Recreation Area near Anchorage, and the Chena River and White Mountains areas near Fairbanks. Most of the Fairbanks-area cabins are designed for winter use and trails are wet in summer. Kenai Fjords National Park has several public cabins. For more information on specific cabins ask our staff.

- **MINIMUM IMPACT CAMPING**

Arctic and alpine vegetation is slow-growing and extremely susceptible to damage even from short-term camping. In such areas, camp on durable surfaces, avoid fires, and use a backpacking stove. Follow Leave No Trace guidelines, leave a clean camp, and pack out or burn *all* wastes. Keep your distance from wildlife to avoid causing them stress. If you want to see wildlife up close, use binoculars or a telephoto lens.

- **EQUIPMENT**

Plan on bringing everything you need with you, as there are few businesses that rent outdoor equipment. Be prepared for cold, wet weather: take good quality raingear and warm clothes. Synthetic fleece and poly-propylene clothes provide good protection, as they dry quickly and provide warmth even when wet. Make sure you have a sturdy tent with mosquito netting and a rain fly, a backpacking stove, first aid kit, emergency flares, insect repellent, sunscreen, and dark glasses.

- **GUIDES AND OUTFITTERS**

Stumped by planning problems? You may want to go with a guide or outfitter. National parks and some national wildlife refuges in Alaska provide listings of the guides/outfitters and air charter services with permits to operate in their areas. Check with local visitors bureaus or the State Vacation Planner for additional listings. The Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association provides listings of guides who support environmentally-responsible tourism (see "Additional References").

- **SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS**

Bears: Black and brown (grizzly) bears inhabit most of Alaska. Read all bear safety information provided and follow the proper procedures for camping and hiking in bear country to reduce the chances of a confrontation. Firearms are not allowed in some parks: check with the managing agency before you go. A red pepper-based aerosol spray that is sometimes effective in repelling bears is available in many sporting goods stores. (It should be enclosed in a sealed container or several layers of plastic bags during transport). You may want to buy or rent bear-resistant food containers (see "Additional References").

Weather: Spring arrives in late May (later in Arctic and coastal areas) and autumn begins in late August. Weather conditions during this short season can include everything from temperatures of 90°F to week-long rainstorms. Snow can occur at any time at higher elevations. Fall colors are beautiful in early September but be prepared for rain, snow, and temperatures below freezing at night. Interior Alaska is generally warmer and drier than the rest of the state; coastal Alaska is rain country. Rivers and streams are generally at high water until mid-to-late June, although rainstorms can cause local flooding at any time.

Insects: Mosquitos populations are highest in June and July and are followed in August and September by biting flies and gnats ("no-see-ums"). Insect repellent and a tent with mosquito netting (preferably gnat-proof as well) are essential. A headnet may prove useful. Choose a campsite on a ridge or a riverside gravel bar where a breeze may bring relief from insects. If you are sensitive to bees or wasps bring appropriate medication.

Water: Boil, filter, or chemically treat all water from lakes and streams before drinking. *Giardia*, an

intestinal bacteria that can cause great discomfort, is widespread in Alaska. Glacial rivers are full of silt which can clog filters: let the water sit overnight so the silt settles out or filter it first through a clean handkerchief.

Maps: Most public information brochures do not have enough detail to provide an accurate picture of your route. Get U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps (scale 1"=1 mile or 1:63,360) and a compass, and know how to use them! If you take a GPS, carry topo maps as a backup in case of loss or battery failure. *Please note:* topographic maps of Alaska may be up to 50 years old. Trails, cabins, roads, and even some villages shown on maps may no longer exist. Check with the land managing agency if you have questions.

Private Land: Much of Alaska's backcountry contains mining claims and private lands, including Alaska Native corporation and village lands, and you may not be welcome. For permission to camp on Native-owned lands contact the village council. The Alaska Wilderness Guide and Adventuring in Alaska have addresses (see "Additional References"), or check on the Internet at www.state.ak.us and click on "communities."

Permits: Permits for campfires or backcountry hiking are not required on most public land units in Alaska, however check in advance with the land managing agency. Parks Canada requires advance reservations for hiking the Chilkoot Trail, and Denali National Park requires backcountry permits which must be obtained at the park *in person*.

Trip Plan: File a "trip plan" with a friend or the agency managing the area that you plan to visit, and let them know when you get back! Allow extra time for bad weather and take extra food in case you are delayed.

• ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

The Alaska Public Lands Information Center carries brochures and handouts on state and national parks, forests, refuges, and recreation areas in Alaska. The Center also has information on planning river trips, chartering aircraft, bear safety, minimum-impact camping, drinking water safety, and hypothermia. Center staff can help you plan your trip. Catch us on the Internet at www.nps.gov/aplic.

- Alaska Wilderness Recreation and Tourism Association (AWRTA): P.O. Box 22827, Juneau, AK 99802-2827. Phone (907) 463-3038, Fax 463-3280, Internet: www.alaska.net/~awrta.

Books:

- Hiking Alaska. Dean Littlepage, 1997. Falcon Press Publishing Co., Helena and Billings, MT.
- Alaska Wilderness Guide. Alaska Northwest Books, Seattle, WA. (Updated every few years, and contains addresses of village councils).
- Adventuring in Alaska. Peggy Wayburn, 1998. Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, CA.
- Alaska's Parklands. Nancy Lange Simmerman, 1991. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.
- 55 Hikes to the Wilderness in Southcentral Alaska. H. Nienhueser and N. Simmerman, 1985. The Mountaineers, Seattle, WA.

Topographic maps:

- U.S.G.S. Map Distribution, Box 25286, Building 810, Denver Federal Center, Denver CO 80225. Phone toll free 1-800-USA-MAPS. Internet: www.usgs.gov/
- Alaska Atlas and Gazetteer. 1992. DeLorme Mapping, Freeport, ME.

Bear-resistant food containers:

- *For purchase:* Garcia Machine, 14097 Ave. 272, Visalia, CA 93277, phone (209) 732-3785; Beaver Sports, 3480 College Road, Fairbanks, AK 99709, phone (907) 479-2494.
- *For rent:* Colville River Mercantile, 1215 27th Ave., Fairbanks, AK 99701, phone (907) 451-6088 or 8823; Big Ray's, 507 2nd Ave., Fairbanks, AK 99701, phone (907) 452-3458; REI, 1200 W. Northern Lights Blvd., Anchorage, AK 99503, phone (907) 272-4565.

Free Alaska Visitors Guide:

- "Official Alaska State Vacation Planner." Call toll free 1-800-862-5275.

*This handout was prepared by the Alaska Public Lands Information Center, 250 Cushman Street, Suite 1A, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701.
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